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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*The Politics of the Soviet Position on
Strategic Weapons Talks*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
29 June 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Politics of the Soviet Position on Strategic
Weapons Talks

Summary

Foreign Minister Gromyko's statement on 27 June endorsing an "exchange of opinions" on steps toward the limitation, and eventually a reduction, of the deployment of strategic offensive and defensive systems marks, at best, only the beginning of a long period of exploration and negotiation. His remarks, the most affirmative public response from Moscow since the US proposed such talks in late 1966, come during a period in which Soviet officials and propagandists alike have increasingly taken the line that the nonproliferation treaty should be followed up by other steps in the field of arms control and disarmament.

It has not been easy for Moscow to clear away its doubts and it has had trouble making the complex calculations--involving as they do important political as well as military, economic, and technical considerations--which underlie its position on discussions. Moreover, there have been several signs during the past year and a half of a disagreement among the Soviet leaders not only as to when and how the USSR should respond to the US offer but also as to whether to respond at all. Gromyko's statement does not mean that the Soviet leaders have decided in favor of an

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agreement, but it would seem to indicate that they are interested in weighing all the factors, including the specific terms any agreement with the US would entail, before reaching decisions on the future of Soviet weapons systems, both offensive and defensive.

The movement in the Soviet position may have flowed from President Johnson's speech to the nation on 31 March. This, by opening up the possibility of a de-escalation of the Vietnam war, may have tilted the scales in favor of at least discussing an arms moratorium. The prospect that an end to the war might free the US to devote huge sums to more and better missile systems--which the USSR would be hard pressed to match--may also have played a large part in the decision inasmuch as the present strategic relationship probably offers the USSR the most advantageous moment to open negotiations on such an agreement.

The other aspect of the President's announcement--his withdrawal from the upcoming election--may have had a similar effect, confronting the Soviet leaders with choosing between negotiating with the outgoing administration or waiting until its successor has assumed office.

Finally, the balance of power within the politburo and the degree to which the Soviet leaders, individually and collectively, believe that the USSR's interests are better served by breakthroughs in the development of new weapons systems than by diplomacy have been and will continue to serve as a very important, if not the most important, factor determining the Soviet position.

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1. Foreign Minister Gromyko's statement on 27 June concerning limitations on offensive and defensive strategic weapons is the most affirmative public response to President Johnson's offer in late 1966 to discuss mutual limitations of strategic weapons. Clearly, it has not been easy for Moscow to resolve its doubts and it has had trouble making the complex calculations--involving as they do important military, economic, technical, and political considerations--which underlie its position on discussions.

2. Hesitation and ambivalence in Moscow have been evident for some time. At issue have been not only questions of when and how the USSR should respond to the US offer but whether. The last question may now have been answered.

3. Until now, the Soviet Government has carefully refrained from closing the door to an arms agreement, but it has demonstrated little active interest in taking up the US proposal that was tendered well over a year ago. A few of the Soviet participants at the meeting in Moscow last December--at which US and Soviet scientists discussed arms control in general and a strategic weapons moratorium in particular--informed their US counterparts in early April that the Soviet delegation was working hard to arrange another meeting. Soviet representatives in general, however, were unable to go beyond asserting that the matter was being given "serious consideration."

4. Soviet First Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov, speaking at the UN on 26 April about prospects in the disarmament field which might be opened up once the nonproliferation treaty had gone into effect, mentioned as a possibility "the limitation and subsequent reduction of the strategic means of delivery of nuclear weapons." Kuznetsov's comment on this subject was limited to a single phrase which, incidentally, went unreported in the TASS and Pravda accounts of his speech. In it, he made no mention of defensive weapons as a subject

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for disarmament negotiations. This was not particularly surprising, however, since Soviet officials, throughout the past two years at least, had been singularly unwilling to admit publicly that "defensive" weapons are a proper subject for arms control discussions. Moreover, Kuznetsov's comment was the closest any Soviet official had come since President Johnson raised the issue of an arms moratorium to indicating in a formal public statement that the USSR was interested in discussing a curb on strategic weapons--conversations which both sides, privately at least, have recognized must deal with offensive and defensive weapons jointly.

5. It is of course possible that an answer to the US proposal for negotiations was delayed, at least partly, to allow time for reviewing the pros and cons of an arms agreement and for working out differences between various interested bureaucracies such as the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Ministry. It is also possible that the delay was deliberate, designed to heighten the ardor of the diplomatic suitor, the US in this case. However, it would also appear that two other factors--the domestic political climate in Moscow and the degree to which US-Soviet relations are ulcerated by the Vietnam war, the crisis in the Middle East and other such international sores--have also contributed to the USSR's delay in taking up the US invitation.

The USSR's Domestic Political Scene

6. Developments on the domestic political scene in the USSR during the past two years have not been propitious for the negotiation of a US-Soviet agreement on limiting strategic weapons deployment and/or development. An increasingly orthodox approach has prevailed in such domestic policy areas as economics, jurisprudence, and culture. A propaganda barrage targeted at the domestic population has featured broader attacks on "imperialism" and shriller warnings about the West's "subversive efforts." As a result, those within the USSR who stand to gain from an exacerbation of US-Soviet relations--hard liners in the propaganda field and

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representatives of the USSR's own "military-industrial complex"--have enjoyed greater weight in the formulation of national policy.

7. One aspect of this development, in turn, has been the expansion of the influence of the Soviet military establishment. During the past two years, this influence has been felt not only in more or less purely military matters--signaled by the fact that its budget has increased not only in absolute terms but also as a share of the total national budget--but apparently, in the drafting of national policy in general as well. The military has become involved in the dispute over the correct orientation of literature, has participated in the discussion of the proper lines along which to organize the national economy, and has used its discussions of military doctrine to put forth its own views as to what sort of foreign policy the USSR should adopt. Needless to say, the military establishment is not monolithic, and its members are not unanimous in their views. The military as a whole, however, generally adheres to relatively conservative or orthodox positions on most policy issues. Its views on issues such as those mentioned above seem to have been given careful consideration by the political leadership, and many of its proposals appear to have been adopted by the latter, although decision-making has remained the prerogative of the political authorities.

The Effect of the International Climate

8. Given this rather inhospitable domestic climate, the question arises as to what might have prompted the USSR to take a step forward. Any meaningful discussion of the USSR's current position on arms limitation must examine the impact of two recent developments--President Johnson's curtailment of US bombing over North Vietnam, which was followed by the agreement to hold talks in Paris, and the President's announcement that he would not seek re-election.

9. Throughout the past year

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political leadership on arms control talks was difficult not only in general but particularly when the war in Vietnam continued to escalate.

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Other developments--such as the Middle East issue--have also been cited as obstacles to better relations between the two nations. However, according to the Soviet side, it has been only, or at least primarily, the war in Vietnam that has so beclouded US-Soviet relations as to prevent the negotiation of an arms moratorium.

10. One manner in which the war in Vietnam reportedly made difficult the task of those favoring arms limitation negotiations was that it strengthened the position of the Soviet military leaders. The military are said to have argued that the US would merely seek to put a brake on missile deployments on both sides until the Vietnam war was over, at which time the US would use the resources presently allocated to the war to expand sharply its strategic attack and defense system. Furthermore, they could cite the large and growing US military budget to press for both the continued strengthening of the USSR's strategic forces--both offensive and defensive--and a build-up of conventional and limited warfare forces.

11. De-escalation in Vietnam, however, could raise serious problems for the Soviet military. If the US were to divert a large portion of the funds now spent on the Vietnam war to strategic weapons programs, the USSR would quickly find itself at a competitive disadvantage in this key military field. On the other hand, a sizable reduction in US defense spending in a post-Vietnam period would deprive the USSR's military leaders of the opportunity to use the US defense budget as a talking point in their discussions with the political leaders, leverage which during the past few years has enabled them to get

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more weapons than they might otherwise have obtained. This, in turn, might well face the military with uncomfortable options: broadly, whether to maximize the USSR's strategic potential while forgoing the build-up of the forces necessary for conventional and limited nuclear warfare, or to expand the latter while restricting the deployment of strategic forces to a minimum deterrent capability.

12. Exactly which way the military establishment would "vote" in such a situation is highly conjectural. Soviet military thinking at present appears to be in a state of transition. Many military figures--for example, the recently deceased Marshal Sokolovsky--have consistently endorsed "massive retaliation" and have done so with an enthusiasm that is reminiscent of the approval which that doctrine enjoyed during the Khrushchev period. Meanwhile, several spokesmen--for example, General Povaly who heads the General Staff's Operations Directorate--have recently discussed the implications of "flexible response" in a manner suggesting that they were arguing for its adoption.

13. Most significant, perhaps, with regard to this question are the signs that the military leaders currently moving into the senior positions in the Defense Ministry for the most part share the views expressed by Povaly. As this new generation of military leaders has assumed the responsibilities hitherto assigned to those who apparently still think primarily in terms of "massive retaliation," the majority view within the Defense Ministry is slowly shifting. In the present circumstances it is possible that the military establishment is willing to consider some limitations on strategic weapons. Its interest would increase all the more were there the possibility that an agreement, while facilitating the allocation of a relatively larger portion of the USSR's defense budget for the development of the forces necessary for limited war and/or overseas intervention, would also offer the USSR an opportunity to achieve a relatively more favorable balance, vis-a-vis the US, in strategic forces than is likely to result from an unrestrained arms race between the two nations.

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14. If, as it has been argued above, the prospect of de-escalation of the Vietnam war has resulted in a more favorable attitude, particularly within the military, toward negotiations, President Johnson's announcement that he would not seek re-election raised new uncertainties. The Soviet authorities probably interpreted the President's announcement as opening up new possibilities in US-Soviet relations. Their present attitude may be further influenced by their assessment of the degree to which the various candidates would make a meaningful effort--in Soviet terms--to seek better relations with the USSR.

15. The significance of this uncertainty over the electoral outcome for the question of negotiating an arms moratorium is that (assuming that the USSR is interested in such an agreement) the USSR must decide whether to proceed now and negotiate with an outgoing administration or wait until its successor has assumed office. The timing of its diplomacy on this subject no doubt has been and will continue to be influenced to a certain degree by how it sees the US election shaping up: will the next administration offer an even better deal or will it be less enthusiastic than the present administration? This is not to say that Moscow's reading of the US political scene will be the determining factor, or even one of the most important factors, but it probably will be a factor.

16. It is also not to be ruled out that the USSR will attempt to use the negotiations as one means by which to "elect" the candidate whom the Soviet leaders would prefer to see succeed President Johnson just as, according to Khrushchev, they used the question of returning the survivors of an RB-47 shot down in June 1960 to "elect" the late President Kennedy that year. Whether or not such a move would in fact affect the outcome of the elections, the important factor would be the degree to which the Soviet leaders think that they might be able to influence the course of US politics.

Making the Decision

17. Finally, two other factors--the balance of power within the politburo where the ultimate

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decision-making process takes place, and the degree to which the Soviet leaders individually and collectively believe that the USSR's interests are better served by an ABM system and other breakthroughs in the weapons field than by diplomacy--have and will continue to serve as very important, if not the most important, factors determining the Soviet position on talks. No matter what occurs with regard to the Vietnam war or which direction the US election seems to be taking, no progress will be made if the balance within the politburo favors those who oppose negotiations. Such a hostile alignment of forces can emerge as a result of developments in fields of national policy that are relatively far removed from military affairs or the course of US-Soviet relations. As for the propensity of the Soviet leaders to place their trust in guns rather than diplomacy, this could be diminished by their becoming convinced that the ABM system they are deploying at present--or various other offensive or defensive systems presently under development--are not proving to be as efficient in guaranteeing national security as had originally been envisioned.

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